

LISTENING AND ATTENTION

What is this developmental skill?

Listening and attention are the foundation of receptive language. Before children can understand language, they must first notice, attend to, and process what another person is saying. This involves focusing on a speaker, filtering out distractions, maintaining attention long enough to hear the message, and shifting attention when appropriate. Listening is an active developmental skill rather than simply hearing sounds.

How does this normally develop?

From infancy, babies naturally orient toward familiar voices, especially those of their caregivers. As children grow, they gradually increase the amount of time they can sustain attention during conversations, stories, and activities. Responsive caregivers help strengthen these abilities by talking frequently, reading aloud, following the child's interests, and gently redirecting attention when needed. Over time, listening becomes more efficient, allowing children to learn from increasingly complex verbal information.

How can neglect interfere with its development?

Neglect often limits the amount of meaningful verbal interaction children experience. Without frequent conversations and shared attention, children have fewer opportunities to practice listening. Chronic stress may also keep the brain focused on scanning for danger rather than attending to language. Some children appear distracted because their nervous system prioritizes survival over learning, while others simply have not had enough experience participating in sustained conversations.

What might this look like?

Children with difficulties in listening and attention may:

- Frequently seem to "tune out" during conversations.
- Miss important parts of directions.
- Have difficulty listening to stories or classroom instruction.
- Become distracted by background noises or movement.
- Need information repeated multiple times.
- Appear inattentive even when they want to participate.

These behaviors may resemble attention problems but can also reflect developmental delays in receptive language or the effects of chronic neglect.

Parenting Implications

Caregivers can strengthen listening by minimizing distractions, speaking in short and clear sentences, reading together regularly, and engaging in frequent back-and-forth conversations. Rather than assuming the child is intentionally ignoring directions, caregivers can pause, gain the child's attention first, and then communicate important information calmly and clearly.

From Understanding to Attunement

Instead of thinking, "*They're not listening.*" consider, "*Their brain may still be learning how to attend to language.*"

Viewing listening as a developmental skill encourages caregivers to create patient, predictable interactions that help children gradually strengthen their ability to focus on communication.